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VI

ROMAN CATHOLICISM

1. *French Colonial Backgrounds*

WHEN France was first establishing a foothold in the New World, religion was one of the consuming passions of the French people. Priests accompanied early explorers, missionaries consecrated their lives to conversion of the Indians; monks, nuns, and parish priests were a vital part of the pioneer settlements of New France. Every family in the mother country hoped that at least one of its sons would devote himself to the service of the Church. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were, par excellence, missionary centuries.

By the time the colony of Saint-Domingue was acquired, however, this religious zeal was on the wane, and just when the colony was becoming prosperous and populous France was entering the phase of her history known as The Enlightenment. Although the growth of the colony is impressive from many points of view, religion is not one of them, for planters intent upon money-making and luxurious living in an exploitative tropical colony gave little energy to spiritual development.¹ The Roman Catholic Church, being the official church of France, was naturally the only important religious organization of the colony; the congregations authorized to send clergy to Saint-Domingue—Carmelites, Capuchins, Dominicans, and Jesuits—divided the territory and work between them.

No doubt the fathers did some assiduous work. Official historians of the Roman Church in Haiti give the definite impression that their task was arduous and not very rewarding.² The torrid heat, diseases (especially yellow fever), the long distances and poor means of transportation were discouraging enough; until the middle of the eighteenth century there was the added difficulty of the poor human

1. It is revealing to see what characteristics of the culture of their mother country colonists bring with them to a new region. French Canadians, in contrast to French colonists in Saint-Domingue, kept many more customs of old France. See J. G. Leyburn, *Frontier Folkways* (New Haven, 1935), pp. 54-57.

2. A good account of the inertia of religious life in colonial Saint-Domingue is given in P. A. Caban, *Notes sur l'histoire religieuse d'Haiti* (Port-au-Prince, 1933), chap. I.

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175 material—Frenchmen who lived "in a deplorable state of morals,
111 too often recalling those of the freebooters and buccaneers" who
were their ancestors and predecessors. Even when the calibre of the
colonists improved, religion was a minor concern, business and
pleasure pushing it well into the background.

[670] There was no great antagonism toward the fathers; indeed, not
enough attention was paid to the priests and their work to warrant
any very strong feeling. It was indifference and insolence the fathers
had to face, or, if they showed too great an interest in the welfare of
slaves upon a plantation, suspicion and peremptory curbs. By the old
Code Noir under which the colony theoretically operated, masters
were obligated to send their slaves to Mass on Sundays and feast days
under penalty of heavy fines; the Code likewise prescribed the bap-
tism of all blacks and their instruction in the Catholic faith. But just
as the colonists ignored all parts of the Code antagonistic to their
own economic interests, so specifically did they disregard the sec-
tions dealing with their religious obligations.

175 Some priests were in any case not too zealous. It was much more
193 agreeable to attend only to external forms, and so participate in the
662 charming life of high society, than to stand firm against laxity. If a
567 priest showed enthusiasm for his duties to his African charges he was
almost certain to be accused by the planters of stirring up the slaves
and undermining the foundations of colonial society. This was, in
• [192] fact, the very accusation leveled at the Jesuits to bring about their
expulsion from the colony in 1764. The example was not lost upon
other priests.

175 "The safety of the whites demands that the Negroes be kept in
711 profound ignorance," said one of the later governors in a message to
563 France. This sentiment, perfectly expressing the conviction of the
majority of planters, not only prevented any secular education of
the blacks, but actually kept many of them from instruction in
catechism, creed, or any part of the Catholic faith. If instruction is
forbidden, few of the sacraments can be administered, for how can a
person be confirmed, confess, do penance, if he know not even the
first principles of the faith? Few masters objected to the baptism of
slave children; on the other hand, they roundly disapproved of the
sacrament of marriage for their blacks, since this might place an
obstacle in the way of slave sales, and even open the way for assim-
ilation of blacks and whites in the colony.

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Granted these obvious difficulties, there is still little to be said for the zeal or integrity of churchmen in Saint-Domingue. Father Cabon cites a report to Rome in 1794, which, he remarks, "was not designed to be made public, and does not bear the earmarks of passion," and which flatly states that "since the expulsion of the Jesuits, the curés have for the most part led lives so indecent . . . that the citizens and Negroes have lost all the sentiments of religion which the Jesuits gave them."² There had been distinguished churchmen in Saint-Domingue before 1750, authors, scientists, teachers of some note, but none appeared thereafter. The rich French colony was not a bright star in the Catholic crown.

Undeterred by those who might have been their spiritual guides, the white people followed the easy path of self-indulgence. The universal testimony of visitors is that, with a few notable exceptions, immorality and cruelty were daily commonplaces. To make a fortune was the prime ambition of every white man, since money made possible the luxurious enjoyment of this world's goods. Protest against money-making or soft living would have been futile. Administrative agents turned public office to their own profit; judges sold justice to the highest bidder; planters drove their slaves to death; and priests dispensed religious solace for a tidy sum.

The freedmen, who in everything patterned their lives after social leaders in the white planter class, had no more concern for religion than their models. They attended Mass occasionally as a social event, where they might see and be seen. When in the latter days of the colony discriminatory legislation required that colored persons sit in separate parts of the church, most of the affranchis simply refrained from attending Mass: their religious zeal was not so great as to make them submit to the public shame of segregation. In their daily lives, likewise, they followed the example of the white planters in pursuing pleasure rather than sobriety, "culture" rather than religious zeal. Like the whites, they were often licentious in their conduct. When it came their turn to direct affairs of state in free Haiti, there was little interest in spiritual matters among them. The intellectuals of the group paid homage to the liberal philosophers of the century rather than to religious thinkers.

If religion was at a low ebb in the prosperous days of the colony, it almost disappeared in the excitement of the years following the

2. *Id.*, p. 22. *revolt of the slaves (1791).*

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THE HAITIAN PEOPLE

- 175 to try to renovate the old. Gradually the work became established,
 795 increasing in scope with the years.
 346 It is not necessary to present a detailed history of the work of
 175 Catholicism in Haiti since 1860. The most striking feature of these
 795 years is its relationship to Vodun, which will be treated shortly.
 The progress made by the Church itself can best be seen by a
 794 summary of conditions in 1930.
 795 Haiti is divided into dioceses named after its principal towns and
 162 cities. The population statistics are based upon figures of births covering more than fifty years, and although estimates, they are probably as accurate as any other population statistics for Haiti:

Archdiocese of Port-au-Prince	942,700
Diocese of Cap-Haitien	453,000
Diocese of Les Cayes	628,000
Diocese of Gonaïves	475,000
Diocese of Port-de-Paix	153,590
Total	2,652,290

- 793 To care for this large and predominantly illiterate population there are 205 priests," only 8 of whom are Haitians; 105 Brothers; and 366 Sisters." The assiduous educational work of these *religieux* will be discussed in another connection.
- 794 The country's 10,200 square miles are divided into 112 parishes,
 162 which generally correspond to the political communes, although there are several parishes in the larger centres of population. In the rural sections 465 mission chapels are located at strategic points."
- 500 Any casual attempt to assess the importance of religion in the daily

[794] 14. Of these, 156 are in charge of parishes or missions (the secular priests). The remaining 49 are regular clergy (that is, belonging to a religious or monastic order). All parishes in the diocese of Port-de-Paix and two in Port-au-Prince are in charge of the regular clergy; the other regular monks are doing educational work or other special service connected with the dioceses.

[793] 15. The Brothers are Frères de l'Instruction Chrétienne; of the number 83 are French, 10 French Canadian, 9 Spanish, and 3 Haitian. The Sisters belong to three congregations: 146 to St. Joseph de Cluny, 198 to Les Filles de la Sagesse, and 22 to Les Filles de Marie.

16. All the figures cited above are drawn from the *Report of the Forbes Commission to Haiti*, 1930, pp. 16-17.

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to the Americans who ruled Haiti through his office. This constitution once more increased the power of the president.

1932. Vincent's constitution, professing to be quite different from the two in effect during the Occupation, but actually closely resembling the 1927 revision with its concentration of power in executive hands. In 1935 an important amendment was added, making it possible for the president to be reelected.

Despite this welter of constitutions, the essential framework of Haitian government has consisted, except for brief interruptions, of a president, a legislature, and courts. The term of the presidency has varied from four to seven years (in the early days, for life) with the privilege of reelection being now forbidden, now granted. Two presidents who tried to extend their terms, Salnave and Salomon, were deposed by revolutions for their temerity. Their distinction of being among the few to serve out the allotted term was thus marred by an ignominious end.

Regularly the president was obligated to "maintain internal peace"—a requirement few heads of state have been able to carry out, since internal peace has been most elusive. To aid him in his task he has been given wide powers: he commands the army (always large until 1915; every president except one between 1804 and 1915 was a general) and the navy (never more than a few ill-conditioned vessels, but these important in the general roadless condition of the country); most constitutions also gave him the right to issue necessary proclamations in order to deal with special crises. He "watches over" tribunals by means of appointed commissioners; by this arrangement he may obviously exert pressure for favorable judgments in cases which interest him.

The one body which might conceivably check the president, namely, the legislature, has generally been composed of the president's men, for the Senate has usually been elected by the lower house from a list of candidates proposed by the president, while the representatives would hardly dare defy the man who controlled the army (which presided over such elections) and could dissolve the legislature. By most of the constitutions the president proposed to the legislature all laws except those concerning taxation; even here, since he directed the receipt and issue of public moneys, he was not really limited. Over foreign affairs the executive had effective control by